What is Chlamydiosis?

Chlamydiosis, also known as psittacosis, is a disease that affects a wide variety of bird species. It is also transmissible from birds to humans. Since the human disease is usually associated with parrots (including parakeets or budgerigars), physicians often call the infection "parrot fever" or psittacosis. Nationwide, between 100-200 human cases are reported annually, although the actual number of cases is probably much higher. Chlamydiosis associated with birds is a different disease from the human venereal disease known by the same name.

What Causes Chlamydiosis?

Chlamydiosis is caused by a tiny organism, *Chlamydophila psittaci* (formerly known as *Chlamydia psittaci*), and is usually spread by inhaling the organism from dried feces. The infectious agent is often transmitted from "carrier" birds. Carriers show no signs of illness, but actively excrete the chlamydia organism in their droppings. Because the carrier state is so common, all birds legally imported into the U.S. are quarantined and must be treated with an antibiotic (chlortetracycline) in their food for 30 days. Despite quarantine and treatment for the disease, chlamydiosis continues to be a problem in pet birds and their owners, because birds can be infected after quarantine, treatment compliance may be inadequate, and, unfortunately, many pet birds are smuggled illegally into the U.S., completely bypassing treatment.

What are the Symptoms in Birds?

Symptoms of chlamydiosis in pet birds can include one or a combination of two or more of the following: ruffled feathers, depression, diarrhea, discharge from the nares and eyes, poor appetite, rapid weight loss, and death. Many other bird diseases have similar signs, making definitive diagnosis difficult and sometimes impossible.

What are the Symptoms in Humans?

Chlamydiosis in people can range from a mild flu-like infection to serious pneumonia. Fever, headache, and loss of appetite are common signs. Many people report painful and difficult breathing. Since physicians rarely suspect chlamydiosis, it is important for people who have been exposed to pet birds to request appropriate blood tests. Blood test results require time, so physicians may prescribe an antibiotic during the waiting period. If you have chlamydiosis, chances are you will begin to feel better very quickly after beginning antibiotic treatment.

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How are Infected Birds Treated?

Infected birds require treatment under veterinary supervision. A form of the antibiotic tetracycline is usually prescribed. One of the best methods for successful treatment is to feed special chlortetracycline-impregnated pellets. These pellets must be fed exclusively for 45 days.

Chlortetracycline may be given orally instead of in the bird's feed, but the medication will not successfully eliminate the disease if placed in the bird's water. Since the treatment period is so long, feeding medicated food pellets is the preferred treatment method.

Treatment Precautions

Once successful medication of your bird is underway, shedding of the chlamydiae will eventually stop. However, precautions must be taken to avoid infecting humans.

Your bird must be isolated during the treatment period, and one person should do all the cleaning, handling, and treatment, to minimize exposure. Protective clothing should be worn, including rubber boots, which can be disinfected after use, and all protective clothing should be left in the bird room. A protective mask will help decrease chances of inhaling the organism.

Because dried feces is more likely to be inhaled, frequent cage paper

changes are very important. The cage papers should be moistened with disinfectant before changing to minimize dispersal of dried material. Feather and dust circulation should be kept to a minimum, and, since they may contain the infective organism, feces, sweepings, and other wastes should be incinerated or disinfected.

Recommended disinfectants for cages, mops, floors, dishes, etc., include Lysol, Roccal, or Zephiran solutions. Following disinfection, hot soapy water should be used, followed by clear water rinses.

Re-Exposure to Chlamydiosis

One month after the full 45-day treatment period is completed, your bird's droppings should be tested for chlamydiae. Although this test is not completely accurate, it can provide some assurance that treatment has been successful. Repeated cultures over several months is also an effective monitoring tool. Despite having had chlamydiosis, birds and humans do not develop immunity to the disease. Boarding your bird or exposing it to other birds (e.g., pigeons housed outdoors) can reintroduce the infection. Although this disease is of great concern to veterinarians and their bird-owning clients, it can usually be successfully treated. Even critically ill birds can sometimes be restored to normal health, as long as treatment is appropriate and given over a sufficient period of time.

Recommendations for Prevention

To prevent chlamidiosis infection, the following steps are recommended:

- Maintain accurate records of all bird purchases, sales and other transactions. This will aid in identifying sources of infected birds and potentially exposed humans.
- Avoid purchasing or selling birds with diarrhea, low body weight or discharge from the eyes or nares.
- Isolate newly acquired birds for at least 30 days, and have your veterinarian test your new bird for chlamydiosis.
- Facilities boarding birds or selling birds on consignment are advised to require testing for chlamydiosis before birds enter the facility.
- Practice good biosecurity -- keep cages, dishes, toys and the bird area clean; position cages so bird waste will not transfer from one cage to another; thoroughly disinfect cages between bird occupants.

For a copy of the NASPHV Compendium of Measures to Control *Chlamydophila psittaci* infection among humans and pet birds, contact your veterinarian.

For More Information

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Chlamydiosis (Psittacosis) in Pet Birds

Facts, Prevention and Treatment

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